
Art and Poetics Around May '68

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/784>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.784

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

Publisher

Groupeement d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 September 2008

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

Electronic reference

Elodie Antoine, « Art and Poetics Around May '68 », *Critique d'art* [Online], 32 | Automne 2008, Online since 31 January 2012, connection on 30 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/784> ; DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.784

This text was automatically generated on 30 April 2019.

Archives de la critique d'art

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- 1 The commemoration of May '68 gave rise to a raft of publications, some of which have the merit of specifying and/or reminding us of the relations struck up between artists and the Events. This is so with the catalogue *Les Affiches de mai 68*, and with Jérôme Duwa's book (*1968, année surréaliste*). The issue of the links between art and politics is also set forth in three books devoted to Narrative Figuration, but without making this movement the only topic. So in the catalogue *Figuration narrative: Paris 1960-1972*, Jean-Paul Ameline earmarks part of his text for the "Political radicalization of narrative figuration"; as for Jean-Louis Pradel, he titles one of the chapters in his book published by Hazan, "Art et politique", and one in the book published by Gallimard "Politique partout!" ("Politics Everywhere!"). Yet the two authors differ in their approach to the movement, especially where chronological markers are concerned. J.-L. Pradel sees the history of Narrative Figuration with a very broad eye, introducing recent books by Hervé Télémaque and Bernard Rancillac. J.-P. Ameline, for his part, reckons that the exhibition *72 douze ans d'art contemporain en France/ 72 twelve years of contemporary art in France* (1972) marks a break in

the dynamics of the movement—with artists at that point being opposed to subscribing to the event. He thus brings to our notice the fact that artists would subsequently be individually presented in the form of solo shows. What is more, the author adopts an exhaustive method which includes commentaries by advocates and detractors of the movement. The well documented chronology, plus interviews with artists, offers much useful material for understanding the theoretical and ideological differences of opinion within Narrative Figuration. Pradel encourages an empathetic reading, proposing excerpts from partisan writings and articles. If there is a customary tendency to crystallize the issue of politics in art around the Atelier Populaire des Beaux-Arts, these particular books seem to see it with more scope and in a more complex light. Reading the chronology in the Grand Palais catalogue, we can take it back to 1965. J.-P. Ameline bases his book on the writings of Gilles Aillaud who, in 1965, in the first issue of the *Bulletin de la Jeune Peinture*, introduced the new orientations of the Salon in an interrogative form: “To what extent, no matter how small, does painting take part in the historical revelation of truth? What is the power of art today in the future development of the world?”. Between the lines, we can glimpse the determination among these artists to lend their praxis an active function with regard to historical events. At the time, part of Narrative Figuration joined forces with the Salon de la Jeune Peinture. J.-L. Pradel reminds us that this salon was then a forum for painters¹ whose line of thinking was markedly steeped in the work of Louis Althusser, a member of the French Communist party, who, in 1965, published *Pour Marx* and *Lire le Capital*. It does not seem surprising to find these artists once more among those invited to Havana to celebrate the 14th anniversary of the revolution in July 1967. Ameline’s chronology devotes three pages to the event, during which French and Cuban artists collectively produced a picture glorifying Fidel Castro. At the time, the Castro regime seemed to wield the same fascination over members of Jeune Peinture as over Surrealists. The Surrealists’ trip to Cuba, along with its consequences, take up the first part of J. Duwa’s book. Based on archival collections of Jean Schuster, Gérard Legrand, José Pierre and Claude Courtot, held at the IMEC, the author suggests an examination of the last two years of the group’s political itinerary. It is, furthermore, by following J. Schuster’s thesis, going back over the history of Surrealism (“Le Quatrième Chant”, *Le Monde*, 4 October 1969) that J. Duwa organizes his ideas. According to the erstwhile Surrealist—Schuster withdrew from the group in January—“Cuba, Prague, May ’68, it’s history itself which makes a path that Surrealism recognizes as its own [...]”. Each essay is preceded by a commentary which enlightens readers about the challenges of the document as well as the context it emerged from. Visual archives are presented in relation to the essays. The illustrative analysis specifies that the author actually emphasizes the significance of the links between images and writings. If the task assigned to the former is to paint the revolution, the Surrealists seem quite critical of this activity. On their return from Cuba, they would speak out against this art which they described as “committed (*engagé*)”. In fact, G. Legrand notes that this “constitutes a danger just as serious as formalism”². So, if we go along J. Duwa, the Surrealists played an active part in May ’68 through the production of tracts and slogans supporting the students: “...the only true actors in the movement”, according to them. The former became involved, for their part, in the production of posters in the Atelier Populaire des Beaux-Arts, offering their services to the striking students and workers. A round of applause for the iconographic re-reading made by Didier Semin with regard to these latter, who also emerged from the encounter between a political substratum (that of Marxism-Leninism) and the structure of advertising posters in the 1930s and 1950s in France³. As for Anne-Marie Garcia, she

broaches a subject hitherto kept under wraps, that of the commercialization of posters at the very moment of their production. She quite rightly notes how the authors of these posters organized their posterity, in particular through the publication--immediately after the event--of books dedicated to them. The author also makes reference to an unpublished document, the logbook of the collections curator at the School of Fine Arts, which might add useful information for researchers working on this issue.

- 2 All these books report on the formal variety that political art enjoyed at the time, often taking up contrasting theoretical stances. Two tendencies thus seem to stand out: painting the revolution, and revolutionizing painting⁴. For all this, it would seem necessary to draw up a typology of these so-called “political” and “committed” works. This will have to be the task of the historiography of the study of these movements.

NOTES

1. Among them Gilles Aillaud, Eduardo Arroyo, Henri Cueco, Bernard Rancillac and Antonio Recalcati.
2. ‘Convention surréaliste’ commented on by J. Duwa, p. 36
3. Research work on posters hitherto placed their sources in Russian propaganda of the 1920s and 1930s.
4. We borrow this dictum from the title of a special issue of the *Bulletin du Curé Meslier*, dated 1972, comparing the members of the Salon de la Jeune Peinture with the artists in the Supports-Surfaces group, whose work, like the Surrealists, fits into the logic of the avant-gardes.